

## Only Two Worldviews?

It has become fashionable among many Christian apologists to assert repeatedly the claim that there are only two worldviews. For instance, in his discussion [At War With the Word - The Necessity of Biblical Antithesis](#), apologist Greg Bahnsen makes the following affirmation:

There are two fundamentally different worldviews in terms of which men conduct their thinking and in terms of which they understand the use of reason itself.

In the same discussion, Bahnsen, while quoting his mentor, Cornelius Van Til, qualifies the senior professor's statement to make nature of the perceived division or antithesis clear, saying

"It is necessary to become clearly aware of the deep antithesis between the two main types of epistemology", Christian and non-Christian.

So Bahnsen clearly wants his followers to assume that the whole spectrum of philosophies can be divided into two fundamentally opposed categories, that which is Christian in nature (presumably whichever flavor of the day Bahnsen held to), and that which is not Christian in nature.

Such a claim implies a global uniformity within Christianity that simply does not exist. Vast divisions and schisms characterize the splintered, sectarian landscape of what could be roundly called Christian theology. These internecine divisions are the offspring of disputes and obscurities which have raged throughout the history of Christianity since its inception. These disputes have only increased throughout the history of Christianity, and the primitive desert ideology now stands as one of the most internally divided religions in the world. These internal conflicts have not left the practice of apologetics untouched. Today we find endless debates on the proper way to defend the mysticism of Christianity, whether it should rest on appeals to evidence, or whether it should simply be accepted unquestioningly on someone's say so. Look at the disputes among self-described presuppositionalist apologists themselves. You have the so-called Clark-Van Til controversy, which stems from, among other things, differences on the matter of "the incomprehensibility of God" (both sides cohere in that they worship the incomprehensible, but they disagreed on the implications this had for epistemology). Even strong divisions mark the relationship between Greg Bahnsen and one of his professors, John Frame. In [yet another case](#), culminating frustration drove one apologist trying to resolve a deepening dispute with a fellow apologist to throw his hands up and proclaim "this is hopeless!" It is hard to see how these apologists could maintain the wild intimation that Christians "think God's thoughts after Him" when their conversations are filled to the brim with such infighting. Are the thought patterns of the "original knower" so tangled that its mouthpieces should be caught up in endless internal bickering when "thinking" the original knower's thoughts "after Him"?

Also, the claim that the categories of Christian vs. non-Christian adequately identify the only two worldviews available to men (many apologists even maintain the dubious claim that a non-Christian worldview as such is impossible in the first place), implausibly suggests a uniformity among non-Christian worldviews that doesn't exist either. The descriptor 'non-Christian' could feasibly apply to a wide diversity of worldviews such as Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Taoism, Existentialism, Dialectical Materialism, Zoroastrianism, eastern occultism, animism, monotheism, deism, pantheism, rationalism, skepticism, etc., and yet the only thing that would hypothetically link these utterly different conceptions of the world together would be that they are not identical with the flavor du jour of Christianity preferred by the defending apologist, which is certainly not a fundamental. It is, as it were, a mere guilt by association fallacy which enables apologists to ignore fundamental differences so that they can treat all non-Christian worldviews as one massive package-deal, thus conveniently attributing to all the errors of some. This would simply lighten the load for the apologist's burden. But it couldn't be more naïve or, worse, disingenuous.

But there is a narrow sense in which I would agree with the statement that there are essentially only two fundamental ways of looking at the world, and therefore essentially only two worldviews. But I would certainly not try to defend such a view on the untenable basis of Christianity's faulty premises. The matter that concerns us here is far more fundamental than Christianity is prepared to deal with. What I have in mind is the nature of the relationship between consciousness and its objects. There is, in the realm of philosophy, no issue which is more fundamental than the subject-object relationship (since consideration of any other issue would require such a relationship), and yet no passage in the bible addresses it. On the contrary, the authors of the bible, like most thinkers, took this matter completely for granted, and thus were unable to fully grasp the profound error which resulted from the reversal of this

relationship which roots the religious conception of the world. Even the so-called “transcendental argument for the existence of God,” which pretends to be an “attempt to discover the preconditions of human experience” (1), nowhere deals with this fundamental relationship, even though without it there would be no experience to speak of.

If there are in essence only two basic conceptions of the world, there is the one which consistently holds to the primacy of existence principle, and then there is any version of the worldview which seeks to cheat this principle by assuming the primacy of consciousness (i.e., the primacy of the subject, the primacy of wishing). In other words, there is on the one hand Objectivism, which is the only worldview I know of that consistently and self-consciously builds upon the basis of the primacy of existence, and on the other hand there is any variant of subjectivism that the human mind can invent, such as Christianity. The former worldview is squarely premised on the objective orientation of the subject-object relationship. It is called *objective* because it recognizes and consistently holds to the fact that that the *object* of awareness holds metaphysical primacy over the *subject* of awareness. On this view, an object is what it is *independent* of consciousness. Anyone can confirm this by looking at any object and seeing whether or not it conforms to his wishes. Wishing is a conscious activity. But do wishes alter the objects we perceive? No, they do not. If I get my credit card bill and it's charging me \$500.00, will the amount that I owe suddenly drop to \$5.00 if I wish hard enough? No, it doesn't. Why? Because of the primacy of existence principle, i.e., the primacy of the object of awareness. Objectivism is the only worldview that consistently recognizes, understands and applies this principle throughout its teachings.

Contrast the objective orientation of the subject-object relationship with the opposite view: the primacy of consciousness. Primacy of consciousness means *primacy of the subject* in the subject-object relationship. This is the view of the world known as *metaphysical subjectivism*: it holds that the subject of awareness holds metaphysical primacy over the objects of awareness. On this view, things are what they are, not because they exist and have a nature independent of consciousness, but because the knowing subject wants them to be the way they are. This is the view that essentially says “wishing makes it so,” granting to the subject of awareness the power to control its objects, to give them their nature, to cause them to obey commands, even to bring them into existence from nothing (“ex nihilo”). The subjective view of the world, which is the essence of religion, grants to consciousness a power which is not observed in nature. Such a power, far from what Michael Butler and other apologists might say, is not something that religious apologists innocently “discover” to be a precondition to man's experience (for indeed, such a power is precisely what we do *not* discover in conscious organisms or experience in our lives). Rather, it is something they have *imagined* to be the case, and most likely *want* to be the case, and on the basis of such preferences *stipulate* rather than “discover” that it must be the case. In such a way religion is not only the worldview which holds that wishing makes it so, the very methodology of its defenses is itself an expression of the view that wishing has such power as well.

So here we have two of the three necessary essentials for a rational worldview: the facts that there are things that exist (cf. “existence exists”), and that some entities (including man) have the ability to perceive those things (consciousness). These two facts - existence and consciousness - are the preconditions of man's *capacity* for experience. To make this experience *intelligible*, however, man requires a worldview which is consistently and self-consciously informed upon the primacy of existence principle identified above, which is the third essential necessary for a rational worldview. Rationality is the commitment to reason as one's only means of knowledge and his only guide to action. Reason itself is premised on the primacy of existence principle, for it recognizes that wishing doesn't make it so. A worldview which assumes that wishes have power over the objects of consciousness could only result in utter unintelligibility and absurdity, like a cartoon without reason or purpose, and thus can only short-circuit man's capacity for rationality.

Many Christian apologists have claimed that Christianity is an objective worldview; some even claim that objectivity is impossible without specifically Christian premises. Apologist Greg Bahnsen says that it is the Christian apologist who “defends the objective truth of the faith.” (2) Likewise his mentor, Cornelius Van Til, says that Christians “must hold that *only the Christian theist has real objectivity, while the others are introducing false prejudices, or subjectivity.*” (3) Another apologist, Douglas Wilson, in [a brief exchange with Farrell Till](#) of [The Skeptical Review](#), writes:

Objective and universal standards of reason, morality, and beauty simply cannot exist in your purely material world. You are fighting Christianity with borrowed Christian weapons.

Statements such as these clearly indicate that those making them think that objectivity is only possible on the basis of the Christian worldview. But it remains stubbornly unclear what these men meant by the terms ‘objective’ and ‘objectivity’. These concepts are not to be found anywhere the bible, so the apologists had to get them from some source(s) outside the bible. But which source(s)? And what do they mean by it? What definitions do they assume when using these terms? Typically they leave the meaning of crucial terms such as these up to their readers' own

assumptions. To compound the mystery of what Christians might mean by 'objective', we have statements like the following:

Because God exists, there is an objective reality -- a reality known and established by God... Christianity recognizes an objective worldview; the perspective of the Creator. (4)

Such statements make no sense, and even suggest that those making them have very little understanding of what Christianity teaches with respect to the subject-object relationship. We can know that Christianity is a form of subjectivism because it assumes the primacy of consciousness; and we can know that Christianity assumes the primacy of consciousness by looking at its core teachings. For instance, Christianity teaches that there exists a consciousness which created the universe. As the *subject* of consciousness, the Christian god is said to have spoken, or more accurately, *wished* the universe into existence. The universe, as the object of the Christian god's consciousness, allegedly conformed and continues to conform to the ruling wishes of the ruling consciousness. This is just one example from Christianity of the subject holding metaphysical primacy over its objects.

Another example of the primacy of consciousness in Christianity is found in the doctrine of miracles. A miracle is an event in which the ruling subject causes an object to act contrary to its nature by merely wishing. For instance, in Mark 6:48-49, we read of a man who enables himself to walk on unfrozen water because he wishes to do so. In John 2 we read of water being transformed into wine simply because he wants it to be wine instead of water.

Yet another example of the primacy of consciousness in Christianity is the doctrine of prayer. Prayer is the act of verbalizing one's own desires to the ruling subject and asking the ruling subject to conform reality accordingly. Many statements in the bible make it sound as if the believer should expect to get whatever he wants due to his faithfulness and prayers. For instance, Matt. 7:7 states "Ask, and it shall be given you." Matt. 18:19 has Jesus say, "if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." In Matt. 21:22, Jesus is made to say, "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." John 14:13-14 amplifies these promises further by having Jesus say "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it." A believer could presumably as that it not be true that Tokyo is a city in Japan, or that Greenland has less surface area than Iceland, and according to these statements, the believer could rightly expect reality to conform accordingly. A worldview couldn't get more subjective.

As a member of the large group of worldviews premised squarely on the primacy of the subject, Christianity is exemplary in its commitment to subjectivism. What Christian would say that there are things in the world which do not conform to the intentions of Christianity's ruling subject? Similarly, what Muslim would say that there are things in the world which do not conform to the intentions of Islam's ruling subject? What theist would say that his god as ruling subject does not have power to control objects at will?

With these points in mind, it should be clear that there are in fact two basic conceptions of the world. On the one hand, there is the objective view which recognizes that objects do not conform to the knowing subject. The worldview that is consistent to this principle is called Objectivism. On the other hand, there is any variety of views which fail to grasp the objective principle and thus systematically corrupt the knowing process by granting validity, however implicitly, to the assumption that the subject holds primacy over its objects. Examples of this latter type are found in any variant of mysticism, such as Christianity.

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Footnotes:

(1) Michael Butler, "The Transcendental Argument for God's Existence," in Schlissel, Steven M., ed., *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen*, p. 79.

(2) *Always Ready*, p. 127.

(3) *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, quoted in Bahnsen, Greg, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 519. Italics original.

(4) Darrow L. Miller, [Breaking the Web of Lies](#)

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [3:30 PM](#)

## 1 Comments:

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

What a sweet, savory post.

You know, I recently read an excellent, and long, essay on the internet that elaborated on what you said about Christianity being fundamentally subjective (gods consciousness taking primacy over reality). And Im trying to find it again now, but no luck! I wish I could find it and link it. Oh well...

[July 25, 2005 3:39 PM](#)